

# Ecological Homelessness

Dear Friends,

As Henry David Thoreau said, “What is the use of a house if you haven’t got a tolerable planet to put it on?” Providing homes for the homeless doesn’t make sense if our planet is becoming homeless. If we truly care about the issue of homelessness we must address the whole area of ecological homelessness.

Planet earth is not well. The environmental destruction and devastation that it is experiencing is primarily the result of human activity. As Calvin B. DeWitt stated, “Human beings have become the predominant destructive force on Earth. With power of hands and minds amplified by machines, our impact exceeds that of great floods, hurricanes and earthquakes. The time has come when we can envisage the end of nature; the time has come to realize that we are able to destroy the Earth.”

We must awaken to the fact that the home we are destroying is not our own. Ronald J. Sider points out that, “Anyone who thinks God created the non-human world merely for the benefit of persons has not read the Bible carefully. God feeds the birds and clothes the lilies (Matt. 6:26-30). God watches over the deer hind in the mountains, counting the months of her pregnancy and watching over her when she gives birth, though she never encounters a human being (Job 39:1-2). In the story of the flood, God makes a covenant, not just with Noah and his family, but also with the non-human creation. ‘I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals and every animal of the earth’ (Gen. 9:9-10). Knowing that they all give joy to their Creator, Christians will treasure every species.”

God has created all of us, every living creation; to live together in one big home called planet earth. If we allow this home to be destroyed, where will we go? What will we do? For this reason we read in Rev. 11 after the seventh trumpet is blown, “The nations raged but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth” (Rev. 11:18).

God has called us to be stewards of creation, the home He has created for all of us. Being earth keepers and not earth breakers involves us directly in the issue of environmental justice. The reason for this is if we have a disregard for the welfare of planet earth and the “least of these” species who live upon it, we are in reality being indifferent to the oppression and violence of the most vulnerable.

It was my growing concern over the oppression and ultimate violence that the poor and elderly were experiencing in their energy needs that led me into the field of renewable energy. For years I had watched the most vulnerable in our society become increasingly enslaved to the big utility and oil companies. In an attempt to help them experience energy independence, I began to earnestly pray for direction concerning alternatives to the big corporations which controlled the utilities and fuel that people needed on a daily basis. As I prayed, I felt God leading me to step out in faith and start traveling throughout the United States exploring all different types of renewable energy. The more I prayed, traveled and researched these alternatives, I became increasingly concerned by the destructive activities these big controlling companies were causing as they relied upon the fossil fuels. I learned that the fossil fuels of coal, gas and oil were contributing directly to the destruction of the earth’s protective ozone shield as well as growing asthmatic conditions of children, miscarriages among women due to the mercury released by fossil fueled power plants, plus how destructive mining techniques were destroying the earth’s surface.

Renee Schoof from McClatchy Newspaper reported, “A one-year study by the National Research Council looked at many costs of energy production and the use of fossil fuels that aren’t reflected in the price of energy. The \$120 billion sum was the cost to human health from U.S. electricity production, transportation and heating in 2005, the latest year with full data. The report also looks at other hidden costs from climate change, hazardous air pollutants, such as mercury, harm to ecosystems and risk to national security, but it doesn’t put a dollar value on them.”

As time passed I became more aware that it wasn’t just the big utility and oil companies but the life styles of all of us in America who were participating in the growing problem of ecological homelessness. Each day more than three species of plants and animals were being eliminated from the earth. One hundred thousand square Kilometers of primary forest (the size of Ireland) was being destroyed each year. Land and water-quality degradation, along with waste generation and global toxification is on the way to destroying planet earth as we know it. When you study Ps 104 you will see this destruction contrasted with the remarkable integrity and beauty of creation that has inspired people since the beginning of time to praise and worship our creator and redeemer.

Even though most people know something is wrong and claim to be concerned they find it easier to live lives of apathy and denial. Mark Hertsgaard in his book, Earth Odyssey states, “Most people tell themselves that dangers like global warming and ozone depletion are so far off in the future that they don’t really exist. On some level, these people may know better than that, but the possibility that we humans are dooming ourselves is simply too terrible a thought to absorb. It is much easier to pretend the danger doesn’t exist, or adopt a childlike faith that everything will turn out all right in the end – surely the experts will think of something! – and burrow back into the routine of paying the bills, getting the kids off to school, and waiting for the weekend.”

People will talk about being green and caring about the problem of ecological homelessness, but in reality it’s back to business as usual. It is so much easier to have a religion that blesses us and tranquilizes us than a relationship with a Living Christ who challenges us to be homemakers on our home planet earth.

The first step to bring about change is to recognize the problem and then seek God for solutions. The initial problem is our indifference and lack of faith to bring about such change. The larger problem is to ask the hard questions like Stuart Primm does in his work, A Scientist Audits the Earth, “Earth at the turn of this millennium is suffering from huge and unmistakable human impacts. Some – the loss of species, certainly, and the loss of tropical forests, most surely – are about to become irreversible. What does this mean for our future as human beings? What will Earth be like as our numbers double?” Primm goes on to say, “Our world is not doomed, it is not fatally wounded, but neither is it healthy. It needs attention, for without stewardship, its wounds will fester.”

It is one thing to hear faith preaching in the safety of the sanctuary; it is another thing to implement such faith in response to the world around us. For a long time I have been concerned about the growing problems of drinking water from plastic bottles. Sure, we can recycle those plastic bottles, but in reality most of them end up in the landfills. Then I read following the earthquake in Haiti that 308,000 bottles of water were being distributed on that Island every day. I took that concern of that daily mountain of empty plastic bottles both in Haiti and America where 2,000,000 every hour are used, to God in prayer. As a result, I am now working with some of our staff in the development of housing through the use of these plastic bottles. I am not exactly sure where the research and development in this area will take us, but I know I can’t sit back and do nothing. If I’m a believer that believes I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”, (Phil. 4:13) then I must step out by faith and move forward.

Thomas Berry has stated in his work, The Dream of the Earth, “Emotionally we cannot get out of our confinement, nor can we let the outer world flow into our own beings. Therefore, we cannot hear the voices speak, or speak in response.” For some it is a lack of knowledge to the extensiveness of the problem of growing ecological homelessness. The National Environmental Report Card declares, “As the results of the most recent surveys make clear, Americans lack the basic knowledge and are unprepared to respond to the major environmental challenges we face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

For others it is a problem of denial. Mark Lyman concludes, “We live in a society consumed by denial, where politicians make the occasional speech about the gravity of the climate change crisis and then go right back to business.” As a result, “Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now (Romans 8:19-22).”

How much longer does creation have to suffer because those who claim to be redeemed refuse to exercise the faith needed? Prediger and Walsh in their book, Beyond Homelessness, have correctly stated, “The world is amiss. The earth is amuck. We are feeling homeless on our home planet... Providing homes for the homeless has no point if our home planet is in peril. Addressing the pervasive and pressing issue of socioeconomic homelessness, important as that is, makes little sense if we do not address the equally pervasive and pressing issue of ecological homelessness. Moreover, ecological destruction has a disproportionate impact on the poorest of the world’s population, and it compounds their experience of homelessness.”

James Speth in his book, Red Sky at Morning points out that, “many of the things they (the poor) are forced to do merely to survive degrade the environment: the search for fuel wood de-vegetates the land, making it more susceptible to erosion and fertility loss; the effort to produce more food depletes the soil nutrients and leads to overgrazing and clearing of forests and woody areas; and reducing the fallow periods compounds these problems.”

Although the problems may seem in many respects overwhelming, there are solutions we as Christians can pray about implementing. In the problem cited above we can make a big difference for good by helping the poor, particularly in countries like Haiti, India, Africa, etc., learn how to build and use solar cookers. When I introduced the solar cooker to a church in India the women immediately broke out in applause knowing how many hours they would save not having to look for firewood.

Many of the problems relating to ecological homelessness are much more complex. In the chapter entitled, Ten Drivers of Environmental Deterioration, James Speth, in his book cited earlier includes the following complex issues: population, affluence, technology, poverty, market failure, political failure, the scale and rate of economic growth, the nature of our economic system, our cultural values, and globalization.

Although time and space does not allow me to go into detail on each of these important areas, I believe I must point out a quote by Christopher Flavin. He states that, “the annual increase of the US population of 2.6 million people puts more pressure on the world’s resources than do the 17 million people added in India each year.” Do you realize that if everyone lived as excessively as we do in the US it would take three planets to support this world? Victor Lebow proclaimed: “Our enormously productive economy... demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and selling of goods into rituals. We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded at an ever increasing rate.” Wasn’t it Jesus who said, “It is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into the Kingdom of God”?

Norman Wirzba points out how our present cultural value system with a worldview that is almost exclusively human centered has contributed to ecological homelessness. “The eclipse of divine transcendence, once understood to be the source and goal of the world, created a hole that would be filled by human beings who now positioned themselves as the center or source of meaning and value. No longer microcosms of the creation, people are the autonomous beings who in an expression of rational freedom, chart and direct the fate of themselves and the world. Again the history of this development towards autonomy is complex. But what emerges is a self, cut off from the world of which it is a part and a world shorn of all remnants of final causality. Nature, a self-regulating mechanism, stands as the arena on which reason and technique can be exercised.”

Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh point out that, “With ourselves at the center and the world a machine, nature gets reduced to the status of an object – merely a resource to be used and, if necessary, abused. It is not difficult to see how such a perspective on the world and one’s place in it sanctions the despoliation of the earth. Viewing ourselves as autonomous creatures, fundamentally unrelated to either God or the rest of creation, we have shaped a culture, an economy, and have built an environment subject to no principles beyond our own self-aggrandizing aspirations and with no sense of kinship with other creatures or their habitats.”

In Romans 1:20-25 Paul clearly points out how such a worldview is not only detrimental to creation (or the environment) but directly effects each and every one of us. “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever.”

The time has come to worship the Creator and recognize His gift of creation by treating it with dignity and respect. To shove the Creator out of our worldview and make creation or the environment the object of our worship, by seeing it exclusively as a resource to be used to feed our god of greed, will ultimately end up in homelessness for all of us. The time for repentance is now. Our sins against creation are resulting in ecological homelessness. Not only does it presently cause us to wonder through our home called earth with a sense of detachment, but to directly destroy this home.

This is the home planet God has placed us upon. Don’t you think it is time we began to care for it with the same stewardship and love God shows us daily?

Yours in Christ,

*Larry Rice*